

PART 2 - INFORMATION SHEET Deptford and the dockyards



Deptford Dockyard by Joseph Farington

“Greenwich: traditionally the hunting ground of kings. From here Henry VIII had looked across at Deptford, seen its excellence as a ship yard and made plans for a navy.”

Lady in Waiting, *Blood Sugar*, scene 1.

Sources of evidence:

- ◆ An exact survey of the cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark, with the country near ten miles round.
- ◆ Deptford Dockyard by Joseph Farington
- ◆ A Map of Deptford, 1623.
- ◆ View of London from Greenwich park 1796
- ◆ Map of the Atlantic World
- ◆ Photographs of archaeologists working on the remains of Royal Dockyard at Deptford.

The Royal Naval Dockyards

Records show that people have been building boats on Deptford Strand on the south bank of the river Thames since the middle of the fifteenth century. At the end of the fifteenth century Deptford was a fishing village, and was used as a repair yard for Henry VII's ships. In the sixteenth century Henry VIII chose Deptford as the new base for his Royal Navy as it was on the river, close to his Palace at Greenwich and to his Armouries at the Tower of London. He founded his Royal Naval Dockyard there in 1513. Plans show it had workshops, a storehouse for naval supplies, two docks and three slipways (ramps used to get ships in and out of the river).

After the Royal Naval Dockyard was built, Deptford became an important seafaring and trading centre. Ships were built, fitted out and stocked with provisions here before being launched on voyages around the world, and were repaired here when they returned. Royal Navy ships sailing from Deptford protected Britain's growing empire and trade routes. Traders and explorers also sailed from the dockyards. People interested in sea voyaging came to Deptford, hoping for support from the king or financial backing from rich London merchants.

Many sea captains owned or stayed in houses close to the dockyard. Captain John Hawkins lived at the Treasurer's House at the dockyard. He was the first English slave trader. He made his first slave trading voyage from Deptford and between 1564 and 1569 he made four slave trading voyages to Sierra Leone. Elizabeth I supported these voyages by lending him Royal Navy ships and giving him provisions. Like Henry VIII she was interested in building the British Empire and opportunities to trade overseas.

The growth of Deptford and the dockyards

The dockyards became a major centre of industry as the British Empire grew. In 2000 archaeologists digging at Convoy's Wharf uncovered the Tudor remains of the Royal Dockyard. Other archaeological evidence they discovered showed that the dockyard grew as more buildings were built in the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries. The dockyards created many jobs in shipbuilding and trades like sail making and chain making. The Pett family were master shipbuilders in Deptford for several generations and built many of the ships that were involved in the Atlantic trade. The timber for shipbuilding came from their estate near Chiselhurst (now called Petts Woods).

People working at the dockyards needed homes, and maps and other records show that the town of Deptford also grew during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Shipwrights, sailors and craftsmen lived in wooden cottages. Sea captains, foremen and officials lived in brick built houses that lined the main streets. In 1703, John Evelyn wrote about the rapidly increasing population of Deptford “...the Town is in 80 yeares become neere as big as Bristoll”.

During the seventeenth century merchants and other wealthy people became increasingly interested in trade with Africa. Many of these merchants had houses nearby in Deptford Green, Lee or Blackheath. Hoping to make big profits, they invested money in ships that sailed to Africa to trade for exotic goods and captured African people, who were made to work as slaves on plantations in British colonies in the Caribbean. The ships returned to Deptford where the sugar, tobacco and other crops produced by these plantations were unpacked and stored before being sold. This became known as the Triangular Trade.

Deptford was a place of arrivals and departures. Many British people who owned or ran plantations and went to live in the Caribbean set sail from Deptford. Many people of African origin who came to Britain landed at Deptford. Some were sailors and some were brought to work in Britain as slaves or servants. Some, like Ignatius Sancho, were later able to buy their freedom.

The decline of the dockyards

Eventually Liverpool and Bristol became the main slave-trading ports. Deptford and other London docks became less important, and less busy. London was still an important part of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, because the banks and insurance companies that put up the money for voyages and insured the ships were based here.

In the eighteenth century a campaign for the abolition of the slave trade started to build across the country. Abolition campaigners held public meetings on Deptford High Street. Many famous abolitionists met at Hatcham House in nearby New Cross Gate. Famous African campaigners, such as Olaudah Equiano, had landed at Deptford when they arrived in Britain, and had lived or worked nearby. Their campaign work helped to bring about the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807 and in 1833 an act to abolish slavery was passed by Parliament.

By the 19th century, the Deptford dockyards were in decline. Other dockyards such as Chatham and Plymouth took over most of the shipbuilding work. The Royal dockyards closed in 1869. The yard was converted into a cattle market in 1871, which closed in 1913. Since then it has been used as a storage depot. In 1984 it became Convoy's Wharf, which is now being redeveloped.

Discussion question

What evidence is there today to show Deptford, Lewisham and Greenwich's links to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the movement for the abolition of slavery? Think about the names of local streets, shops, pubs and housing estates; old buildings; plaques and statues.

Deptford: Useful links

The Royal Dockyards of Deptford and Woolwich
<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/server/show/conWebDoc.163>

Deptford – a history in pictures
<http://picasaweb.google.co.uk/lewishamheritage>

Ideal Homes: Deptford
<http://www.ideal-homes.org.uk/lewisham/main/deptford.htm>

Information about the Royal Dockyards on the Portcities website
<http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/ConNarrative.52/Deptford-and-Woolwich-Londons-Royal-Dockyards.html>

Information about Deptford on St Paul's Church website
http://paulsdeptford.org.uk/SPD_ver2/Deptford.htm

Zoomable map of Deptford printed in the eighteenth century.
<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/collections/explore/chartzoom.cfm/imageID/K0933/x/6307/y/764/zoomlevel/4/#content>

Plans and drawings of Deptford in the British Library
<http://www.collectbritain.co.uk/collections/deptford/>

Sources and information about shipbuilding in London
http://viewfinder.english-heritage.org.uk/story/story_intro.asp?story_uid=33

HMS Buckingham on the Stocks at Deptford, 1751
<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/searchbin/searchs.pl?exhibit=it3151z&axis=1201185827&flash=true&dev=>

HMS Royal George at Deptford Showing the Launch of HMS Cambridge, 1757
<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/searchbin/searchs.pl?exhibit=it3152z&axis=1201185827&flash=true&dev=>